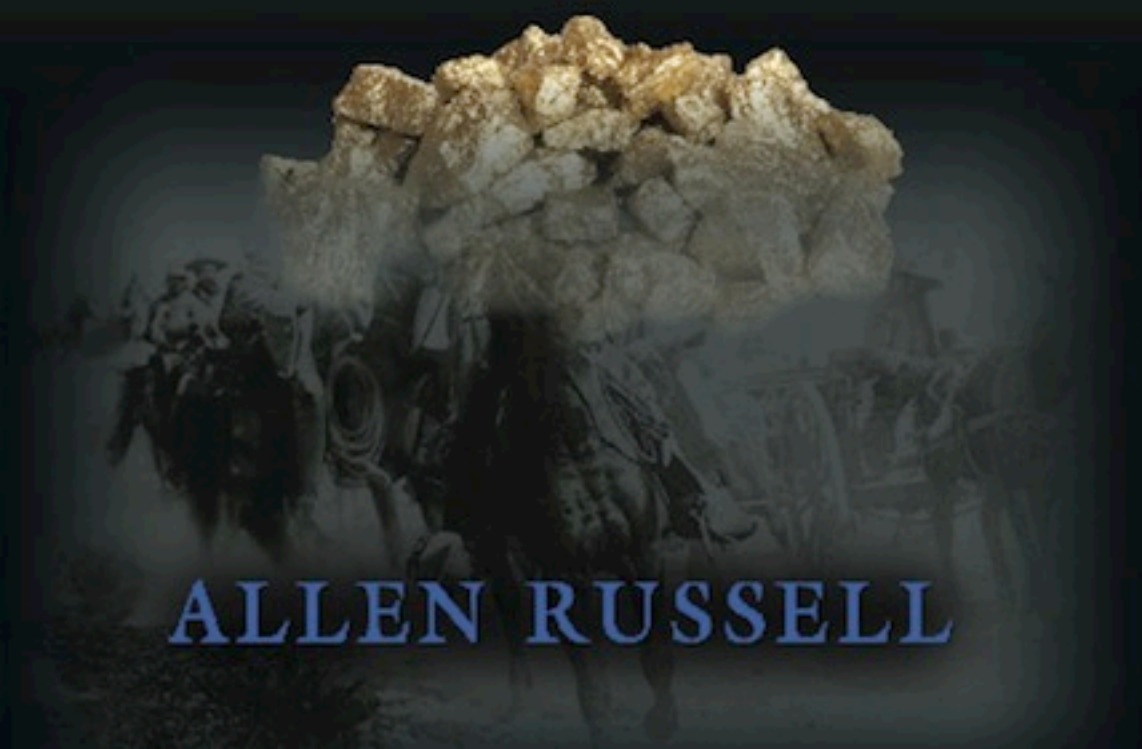




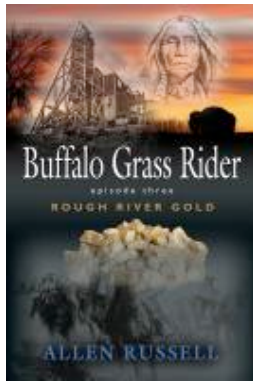
Buffalo Grass Rider

episode three

ROUGH RIVER GOLD



ALLEN RUSSELL



***Rough River Gold** is episode three of the award winning Buffalo Grass Rider series. Bolt Ashton, known to the Indians as Buffalo Grass Rider, and his saddle partner are drawn into an international plot to steal a huge stockpile of federal bullion hidden deep in the Black Hills of the Dakota Territory.*

Buffalo Grass Rider

Rough River Gold

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Bolt quickly scanned the silent room as he stepped across the threshold. Eb was right behind him and holding a scattergun. There were at least half-a-dozen men at one table on Bolt's left and one lone figure sitting on his right. A saloon girl and the bartender stood on opposite sides of the bar. The bartender seemed to be nervously watching something at his feet.

"I'm looking for Burton Simms and Ethan Donahue," Bolt said to no one in particular.

Eb leveled the shotgun at the men on his left, "And any other sonofabitch that ever set foot on the Lonesome Wind."

A growing sense of panic engulfed the room as the railroad men realized what they feared most had just walked in the door. Their worst nightmare was flesh and bone and standing right in front of them.

The lone man on Bolt's right stood up from the table, he was wearing a badge.

"What do you men want here?" he asked.

"This is none of your affair," Bolt said, "I'm here to kill these men."

"That makes it my affair," the man with the badge said. His hand went to the heavy revolver hanging at his side, "I'm Sheriff Toy Robey, the law around here. There isn't going to be any killing here tonight. I don't know what's between you all, but everybody stop, right now."

"Take a seat, Lawman," Eb warned, "you can't stop this."

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First Edition



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Chapter One: In the Black Hills

The lathered six-horse team was at a dead run as the daring driver negotiated the winding mountain road. The stagecoach and the highwaymen chasing it were raising a rolling dust cloud as they thundered through the rugged terrain of the Black Hills.

Using a heavy strongbox for cover, a lone rifleman lying on top of the coach was doing his best to fight off the outlaws. His attempt to draw a bead on the road agents was being hampered by the violently rocking coach and the bouncing strongbox.

"Will you watch it!" he yelled at the driver, "If this bunch don't kill me, you're gonna throw me off o' this thing and do it for 'em."

The driver's voice was barely audible over the pounding hooves and rumbling wheels of the stagecoach, "You just worry about the bunch chasing us and let me tend to the horses."

"I can't shoot at them for hanging on."

"If you'd plug a couple more of 'em instead of whining like an old lady, maybe we could slow down."

"An old lady...you ornery old moss-backed..."

Ducking a ricochet bullet from the strongbox, the determined rifleman quickly recovered his composure, levered a fresh round into the chamber and turned his attention to the pursuing outlaw that fired the shot.

The brazen outlaw was wearing a black derby hat secured to his head with a red bandanna knotted under his chin. Before the rifleman could get off a shot, the derby-wearing outlaw drifted to the edge of the road and disappeared in the swirling dust. Settling his sights on another target, the rifleman touched the trigger. With the report of the rifle, the second outlaw tumbled out of the saddle and disappeared under the pounding hooves of his companion's horses.

The sharp bark of a pistol from down below told the rifleman he had help from at least one of the passengers inside. Despite the deadly gunfire from the coach and the choking dust, the remaining road agents continued to press the attack.

Buffalo Grass Rider

In the past, the outlaws would block the road, take the gold shipment from the normally cooperative drivers and be on their way without firing a single shot. That plan fell apart at the ambush site when the grizzled old cowboy in the driver's seat not only refused to stop, but did his best to run over them.

The rifleman was Bolt Ashton from Coulter Creek, Montana. The driver was Bolt's saddle partner, Everett Monday, Eb to most everyone. Through an unlikely set of circumstances these two Montana cowpunchers were in the Dakota Territory.

Eb's long white hair was flying as he handled the reins. His hat brim was laid back flat as he leaned into the wind urging the team on, "Heyaa! Heyaa!"

Inside the rocking coach, a frightened man in a tailored suit was attempting to stay low under the window openings. Doing his best to avoid being shot, his head was resting on the knees of the attractive dark-haired woman sitting across from him.

A tall lanky cowboy had been crammed in the seat next to the dark-haired woman when the holdup attempt began. Unwilling to just sit by and be a helpless victim, he was hanging out the window firing his Colt revolver at the pursuing outlaws. Expendng the last round from his .44-40, the cowboy sat back in the seat opened the gate and started turning the cylinder, allowing the spent cartridges to drop in the floor.

The cowering man in the suit was growing desperate, "Why don't they stop and give the bandits what they want?"

The cowboy frowned, "Stop...them boys up on top ain't stopping for nobody."

Growing tired of his groveling, the woman shoved the cowering man in the suit upright, "If you're not going to help, get out of the way."

She placed her foot in the middle of his chest and pinned him to the seat across from her. The rest of the passengers watched as she pulled up her flowing skirt and petticoats to reveal a long shapely leg and a small leather holster. The compact rig was secured to her garter belt and held in place by a red velvet strap around her thigh.

Rough River Gold

Pulling a converted Colt Navy pocket pistol from the holster, she offered it to the cowboy, "Here, take this one. I'll reload for you."

As he took the little .38 rim-fire revolver, the cowboy's attention was fixed on the provocative patch of bare skin showing between the woman's garter belt and the top of her black silk stocking, "Much...ah...much obliged, ma'am."

Returning to the window, the cowboy could feel her removing spare cartridges from his gun belt as he fired at the road agents. The dark-haired beauty made short work of reloading and the .44 was ready in just a moment. The cowboy pulled his head back inside and took his pistol from her, "This ain't your first gunfight is it, Miss...ah...Miss"

"It's Lana, and no, not by a long shot."

"Slim's my name, good to make..."

They both instinctively ducked as a bullet hit just above the window opening sending a piece of trim flying through the coach. The frightened man in the suit fainted dead away.

Lana smiled at the cowboy, "Good to know you, Slim. Keep shooting!"

As the running gun battle raged, two more highwaymen were waiting with a pack mule at the mouth of Mongol Canyon. According to the plan, they were to meet the other members of the gang, take possession of the heavy strongbox and escape into the dark timber.

They waited at a place where the coach road becomes extremely narrow and treacherous. For more than a mile beyond that spot, the roadbed had been dynamited out of the steep rocky walls of the canyon. Most experienced stage drivers knew better than to chance the deadly Mongol Road with any speed at all.

Alerted by the sound of gunfire, the waiting outlaws were shocked when the careening coach burst around the curve in front of them. With the driver showing no signs of slowing down, the first outlaw was uncertain about their next move, "Don't let 'em...what are we gonna...they ain't gonna make it."

Buffalo Grass Rider

The hurtling coach was nearly on them when the second outlaw jerked his horse's head around and headed down the road. The first outlaw released the mule, pulled his horse around and followed his companion.

The roadside bank was too steep for horses on the uphill side. The downhill side was a near vertical drop-off. As the coach overtook them, the stampeding mule swapped ends and headed back up the road, barely passing between the rock wall and the coach. Unfortunately for the fleeing outlaws, they were trapped on the outside of the curve.

In a desperate attempt to slow the coach, Eb's placed his foot firmly on the brake handle and bore down with all his might. He reared back on the reins and shouted, "Whoa! Whoa!" Smoke was rolling from the leather-lined brake pads when the rear wheels of the coach locked up and began to slide toward the gaping canyon.

Anticipating a looming disaster, the passengers inside were screaming as the coach slammed into the fleeing outlaws, driving both of them off the road and over the canyon rim. Rolling rocks and fading screams followed the doomed outlaws and their horses down the steep slope.

The heavy strongbox slammed into the roof rail as the coach tilted dangerously toward the outside of the curve. With the wheels barely clinging to the edge of the crumbling road, Bolt was gripping the rail with one hand, hanging on to his rifle with the other and yelling at Eb, "Dammit, will you slow down!"

The coach righted itself as Eb released the brake and the rear wheels began to turn once again. Inside the rocking coach, Lana was tightly pinned against Slim.

"Sorry," she said as she pulled away from him.

"Think nothing of it," Slim replied, "This has been one hell of a stagecoach ride."

After witnessing their cohorts go over the edge, the remaining outlaws abandoned the chase and disappeared into the dust. When the gunfire ended, Bolt slid forward and dropped into the seat next to Eb.

"You can ease 'em back now, they gave up."

Rough River Gold

“They never had a chance of catching me,” Eb said.

“One more turn like the last one and they could just pick up the pieces.”

“Well, Mister Cautious, next time you can drive and I’ll sit inside with the ladies.”

“After ten minutes worth of you, the ladies will be trying to jump out and walk the rest of the way.”

“Is that right...let me tell you...”

“There’s nothing you can tell me that I ain’t heard before,” Bolt said, “Just get this thing to town and let’s see if anybody’s left alive inside.”

Bolt Ashton was a Montana cowboy in his late forties. He was just under six-foot four with graying hair and a salt-and-pepper mustache. He was an easy going, quiet man most of the time, but he had a fiery temper. In addition to that temper and unknown to most, he had a dark and dangerous side.

Passed down to him by an ancient Cherokee ancestor, Bolt harbored a remorseless warrior spirit in his blood. Bolt was able to control the brutal spirit most of the time, but if ever unleashed, only blood could put it back. Anyone foolish enough to call it forth would probably pay with their lives.

Eb Monday was Bolt’s saddle partner and his best friend. On the shady side of fifty, Eb stood six feet tall with long white hair and beard. Eb was a flamboyant dresser with a fringed buckskin shirt. He wore his pants inside his high top boots and he carried a big Mexican-made sheath knife on his belt. A double barreled 12 gauge coach-gun was his constant companion.

Both of these men worked and lived on the Lonesome Wind Ranch in Eastern Montana. They were unknown in the Black Hills and that was part of the reason they were there.

The sound of the running battle had been heard from a long way off and several townspeople were in the street waiting for them. The worn out horses were blowing hard and soaking wet when Eb pulled

up in front of the express office. He set the brake with his foot, wrapped the reins around the brake handle and followed Bolt down to the ground.

The first man to emerge from the stage line office was Ben Bailey, an old friend of Bolt's and the manager of the stage line. "You boys have a little trouble?"

"Them road agents were the ones with the trouble," Eb said, pulling off his gloves. "You better get somebody to unhitch and cool these horses before you put 'em up."

"We'll take care of that," Ben said, "I'm glad to see you made it in one piece."

Bolt opened the door and began helping the ladies out of the coach. The dark-haired beauty with the pocket pistol held him around the neck a little longer than necessary after her feet were on the ground. Staring into Bolt's eyes she said, "Thank you for protecting us back there, I'm Lana Chambray."

Bolt tipped his hat, "Bolt Ashton, ma'am, pleased to meet you."

"Bolt, I'd like to thank you properly, a little later."

"That isn't necessary,"

"Come over to the Gold Dust tonight, at least let me buy your supper."

"We stay mighty busy around here," Bolt said, "but thanks anyway."

"I won't take no for an answer. You have to eat sometime; you might as well let me feed you."

Releasing Bolt, Lana picked up a small valise and headed toward the Gold Dust. Bolt and Eb along with every other man on the sidewalk watched her swaying hips as she walked away.

"Mercy sakes," Eb said under his breath.

"Yeah," Bolt agreed.

The Gold Dust was the local saloon and eatery where Lana made her living. The word around town was this mysterious lady was from New Orleans. Lana was in her early thirties with long shapely legs she showed off with a slit in her working dress. She had short raven-black

Rough River Gold

hair and deep dark eyes. Business at the Gold Dust really picked up after Lana hit town.

The next passenger out of the coach was the man in the suit. His face still deathly pale, he shook his finger in Eb's face, "I'll never...ride this stage line again. The governor will be hearing from me. Risking our lives like that, I'll have your job!"

Remaining calm, Eb replied, "Name's Monday, M, O, N..."

"I can spell, you arrogant ruffian," the man said. Picking up his case, he hurried off down the sidewalk.

The last man to exit the coach was the tall lanky cowboy who had been shooting at the bandits, "Hell of a ride, boys...hell of a ride."

"Thanks for your help," Bolt said, extending his hand.

"Anytime. That bunch will think twice before they tangle with you all again. Masters is my name; most folks call me Slim."

"Bolt Ashton, that's my partner behind you there, Eb Monday."

Eb shook the cowboy's hand. "Slim, good to meet you, much obliged for your help."

"Think nothing of it, mighty good to meet both you boys." With that, Slim picked up his gear and started for the hotel.

Bolt and Eb went inside and sat down with Ben in his office.

"You boys are the first ones to ever get through without stopping for that bunch," Ben said.

"Do they rob every coach coming out of the Black Hills?" Bolt asked.

"No, they seem to know which ones are carrying a valuable cargo. They were just about to put me out of business."

Eb went to the stove and poured himself a cup of coffee, "It looks like you're the only stage line running into the hills anymore."

"Everybody else has stopped carrying gold," Ben said, "can't afford the financial risk. If you hadn't come to help me, I would have been forced to quit."

"We're glad to help," Bolt said. "What's so important about running into the hills?"

Buffalo Grass Rider

“There’s a new mining operation up in Rough River. They’ll be shipping bullion out of there on a regular basis. Any stage line that can land that contract and keep those shipments safe will make a fortune.”

“How far is Rough River?” Eb asked.

“Just over twenty miles, but it’s a steep rugged road with plenty of places for an ambush. It’s even worse than the run you boys just made from Custer.”

“We’ll try that sometime soon,” Bolt said. “Right now, I’m ready to get something to eat and some sleep.”

“Bolt, be careful around that Lana,” Ben warned, “There’s a pretty rough bunch in and out of the Gold Dust. I don’t know how close to them she is.”

“You don’t have to worry about Bolt,” Eb said, “he’s practically married.”

Ben smiled, “Married, that ain’t the Bolt Ashton, I remember.”

“With age come’s wisdom,” Bolt said.

“Yeah maybe,” Ben said as he got up to leave. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Bolt was originally from Tennessee. At odds with the Confederacy over the issue of slavery, he served with the Union Army during the Civil War. Bolt had been a captain with George Custer in the Second Brigade, Third U.S. Cavalry.

Ben Bailey was a sergeant-major serving under Bolt. He saved Bolt’s life one late spring day in the Shenandoah Valley at a place called Yellow Tavern.

Bolt was giving orders to a small group of men when Ben somehow heard or sensed a falling mortar shell. He threw himself and Bolt to the ground an instant before the shell landed among them. Ben was slightly wounded and all the others were killed instantly. Bolt didn’t have a scratch. There was no question, if not for Ben’s actions Bolt would have been killed right along with the others.

Ben was having real trouble with this gang of road agents. They seemed to know everything about his operation. He needed someone

Rough River Gold

unknown in the Black Hills and someone he could trust. Thinking Bolt was the man Ben got in touch with him in Montana. Bolt felt like he owed Ben and he was ready for a little adventure. He left Montana and headed south to the Black Hills.

Bolt was in love with a woman that lived and worked on the Lonesome Wind. They planned a wedding but it hadn't happened yet. He also had an eleven year old son from an affair in Texas. The boy's mother was dead and the boy lived with Bolt on the Lonesome Wind.

Eb decided to come along with him because that's what partners do. Bolt and Eb met in Texas before they moved up to Montana with the Lonesome Wind herd. They had been close friends and partners for more than a dozen years.

The Gold Dust was jumping as Bolt and Eb walked in the swinging doors later that evening. Lana spotted them from across the crowded room.

"Bolt," she called out. Everyone in the place was watching as she went to greet them.

Lana was wearing a form-fitting red dress with her trademark slit up the side. It was low cut to show off her other ample charms. No one would call Lana heavysset, but she was a lot of woman. There was some meat on her bones, but it was in all the right places and a man would have to be three-days-dead not to notice.

Lana approached and took Bolt's arm, "I'm so glad you came by."

Unfamiliar with electric lights, Eb was looking around the brightly lit room, "This is some place."

"I don't believe I got your name," Lana said.

Eb removed his hat and took her hand, "Everett Monday...at your service, ma'am."

"Everett. That was some ride you gave us this afternoon."

"Yes ma'am, thank you...please call me Eb."

"Alright, Eb, I'm Lana. Please, take a seat while I get you something to drink. What'll it be?"

"Something strong to cut the dust," Eb replied.

"Make mine a beer," Bolt said.

Buffalo Grass Rider

Rapid Creek was a small frontier town on the northeastern edge of the Black Hills. In addition to a few fulltime residents, prospectors as well as businessmen, hunters, and travelers moved through on their way west and the town was growing.

The Gold Dust was on Main Street and right in the middle of town. For a frontier saloon, it was a pretty fancy place. In addition to the newly installed electric lamps, there were numerous tables spread around the room and a big bar with a full length mirror.

Lana brought their drinks and sat down next to Bolt. "What'll you boys have to eat?"

"What do you recommend?" Bolt asked.

"Our cook serves up a really good pan-fried beef steak."

Eb downed the contents of his glass and wiped his mustache, "Steak sounds good to me." He pointed at the empty glass, "and another one of those, if you please."

"Fine, I'll be right back." Lana got up and walked away toward the kitchen.

"That's one good-looking woman," Eb said when she was out of earshot.

"Yes she is," Bolt said, "she sure seems interested in us for some reason."

"She's interested in one of us."

After bringing their supper, Lana sat with them while they ate.

Eb carved off a hunk of meat and speared it with his fork, "This is mighty fine."

"I'm glad you like it," she said, "where are you boys staying?"

"Ben has some bunks in the back of the express office," Bolt said.

"I have a nice room at the Hills Hotel," she said, "If you ever have a desire for a bath or clean sheets."

Unsure of what to say to that, Bolt finally replied, "We're just fine, but thanks anyway."

"Well my door is always open to you, Buffalo Grass Rider."

Rough River Gold

“Where did you hear that?”

She smiled. “I hear things. I love that name, I’d like to hear how you got it, but right now I have to go to work. I’ll check on you later.”

“She sure ain’t bashful, is she?” Eb said when she was gone, “You better watch yourself.”

“Bashful,” Bolt repeated, “Bold as brass, I’d say. She’s no problem for me. I just want to get this job done and get out of here.”

“She better not invite me up to try those clean sheets.”

“Not much danger of that now that she’s seen the Buffalo Grass Rider.”

“Is that right,” Eb said, “You don’t fancy yourself much, do you!”

“I got the invite!”

While they were eating, Bolt noticed a group of men sitting at a nearby table. He briefly made eye contact with one of them that seemed to be watching him. The man was dressed in a tailored, light gray frock coat with brass buttons and a yellow sash. It reminded Bolt of a confederate officer’s uniform. Bolt could tell the man and his companions were talking about him and Eb. Bolt turned his attention back to his supper and dismissed the man in the gray coat.

A few minutes later, Bolt noticed an ancient black man approaching the table where the man in gray was sitting. The old man was stooped over with snow-white hair and a short beard. The old gentleman shuffled across the room with guarded steps and placed a platter down in front of the man in gray. The man in gray never looked up or even acknowledged the old man’s presence. That stuck in Bolt’s craw, but it was none of his business. Once again he tried to put the man in gray out of his mind.

The man in gray was Fitzhugh Claiborne, owner of the Gold Dust and Lana’s boss. Fitzhugh had an eye for the Cajun beauty and he wasn’t happy about Lana showering so much attention on the two strangers. Shaking out his napkin, he tucked one corner behind his

collar and turned to the young man across the table, "Who are those two strangers talking to Lana?"

The youngster sitting across from Fitzhugh was Billy Sands. He was more of an errand boy than a hired gun, but he did his best to act tough when he was carrying out Fitzhugh's wishes.

"It's those cowboys Bailey hired to drive the stage," Billy said, "they're from up in Montana somewhere. Word around town is they put a pretty good whipping on Garland's boys this afternoon up on the Mongol Road."

"I heard one of the passengers talking about that," Fitzhugh said, "Claimed they killed several of Garland's men. We can't afford for that kind of thing to continue."

"What are we gonna do about it?" Billy asked, "Them two are nobody to mess with."

Fitzhugh's brow wrinkled as he watched Lana go back to Bolt's table and sit down, "Where did Bailey find them?"

"I hear the big one served in the army with Bailey."

"He's a damn Yankee," Fitzhugh said, "What about that old man with him?"

"His name's Monday," Billy said, "I hear he's originally from Texas, a bounty hunter and an Indian fighter in the old days. The big one's name is Ashton. He's from Tennessee the way I hear it."

Fitzhugh bristled. "Tennessee! He's a damn Yankee and a traitor."

"Maybe he has something to do with those mules."

"Mules," Fitzhugh repeated.

"Been going on for three weeks," Billy said, "Every train arriving from back east has been carrying half-a-dozen mules. Somebody picks them up next day and they just disappear. I ask the wrangler down at the stockyard about it. All he knows is they're coming from Tennessee."

"Forget the mules," Fitzhugh said, "I want to know what those two men are doing here."

Rough River Gold

“You better be careful, Boss,” Billy said, “I’m telling you, them two ain’t to be messed with.”

“Billy, I want you to ride up to Garland’s camp at first light,” Fitzhugh said, “find out how bad his gang got hurt. There should be a big shipment coming out of Rough River soon. We have to be ready to move.”

“What about those cowboys?” Billy asked.

“Leave them to me.”

Fitzhugh Claiborne had been an officer in the rebel army. The economic, social, and emotional wounds left from the Civil War were still fresh in his mind. Garland Claiborne was Fitzhugh’s kid brother. Fitzhugh fed him information about shipments coming from the hills. They had a pretty good thing going until Bolt and Eb showed up.

Bolt and Eb had just about finished supper when Lana brought them another drink and sat down next to Bolt. Lana wasn’t one of the soiled doves that worked for Claiborne, but she was no angel either. She had experienced a few encounters since she arrived in the Dakota Territory, but nothing serious.

Fitzhugh Claiborne was infatuated with Lana, but she had never shown much interest in him. As far as Lana was concerned, he was her boss and nothing more. She came to the Black Hills seeking recognition and fortune. So far it didn’t seem Fitzhugh could provide either one.

Fitzhugh was determined to change that in the near future. He planned to offer Lana a chance to become not only his wife, but a rich and politically powerful woman.

Fitzhugh was a pompous and arrogant southern aristocrat who thought he was superior to most of the frontier types in the Dakotas. He was growing weary of the attention his intended was lavishing on the stranger sitting in his saloon.

Bolt pushed his plate aside and wiped his mouth with a white linen napkin, “That was a great supper.”

Lana turned to Bolt and put her hand on his shoulder, “I’m glad you enjoyed it.” Looking down at his chest, she played with the third

Buffalo Grass Rider

button on his shirt all the while giving Bolt a pretty good view of the front of her dress, what there was of it. Then she slowly raised her eyes and looked seductively into his.

“Anything else I can do for you?”

Her lashes were the longest Bolt had ever seen. “I think you’ve done plenty already,” he said. Trying not to stare at her abundant cleavage, Bolt could feel the heat coming off his face.

Feeling the man in gray’s stare from across the room, Bolt glanced over to see him remove his napkin and toss it on the table.

Despite his huge ego, Fitzhugh was slender and gentle. He had a fair complexion with reddish hair and a thin goatee. No one knew it, except his man servant, but Fitzhugh wore a corset to give himself a staunch upright appearance and a slender waistline. That helped to emphasize his less than impressive chest and narrow shoulders. Almost feminine in some ways, he stood out in sharp contrast to the crude clientele of the Gold Dust Saloon.

Fitzhugh’s servant, an old man named Elijah, had been a slave belonging to Fitzhugh’s family since long before the Civil War. Fitzhugh had no idea how old Elijah was. The old man had been around for as long as Fitzhugh could remember. He was given to Fitzhugh for his eighteenth birthday. Fitzhugh didn’t mistreat him, but in spite of the years he spent with the old man, he considered him a servant and nothing more.

Elijah had been free since the emancipation act, but having nowhere to go; he chose to stay with Fitzhugh. In return, Fitzhugh paid him a pittance of a salary along with his room and board.

Lana was a flirt. It was part of her charm and Fitzhugh was used to that, but he could tell this was different. She was attracted to the rugged good looks of this stranger from Montana.

Fitzhugh got to his feet, adjusted the derringer hidden in his yellow velvet sash, straightened his coat and strolled over to Bolt’s table. Fitzhugh should have been an actor. His movements were always exaggerated and overly animated.

Rough River Gold

“Good evening, gentlemen,” Fitzhugh said with a sweep of his hands, “welcome to the Gold Dust.”

“Thanks,” Eb said. “It’s a nice place.”

“I’m Fitzhugh Claiborne.”

“Eb Monday; this here is Bolt Ashton.”

“Eb, it’s good to meet you,” Fitzhugh said, then turned his attention to Bolt. Lana pulled away from Bolt and sat back in her chair. “Mister Ashton,” he said, extending his hand.

“It’s just Bolt.”

Bolt shook his hand but he felt no need for the social niceties. Bolt already knew what Fitzhugh was. He spent nearly four years of his life fighting men like Fitzhugh. He could barely tolerate his presence.

Fitzhugh took the empty chair next to Eb, “What brings you all to the Black Hills?”

“Just looking for a job,” Eb said.

“I hear you’re driving for Bailey.”

“We thought we’d give it a try.”

“That could be pretty dangerous work around here.”

Eb smiled, “It was pretty damn dangerous for the bunch that jumped us this afternoon.”

“Yeah, I heard about that,” Fitzhugh said, “You all may not be as lucky next time.”

Holding a small table knife, Eb pointed the blade at Fitzhugh, “Luck had nothing to do with it. If what’s left of that bunch knows what’s good for ’em, there better not be a next time.”

Bolt grinned at his partner as Fitzhugh’s brow wrinkled. Repulsed by Eb’s arrogance, Fitzhugh gave Eb a phony smile and turned to Bolt.

“I understand you’re from Tennessee.”

“That’s right, how’d you know about that?”

“I make it a point to know about the people who come and go around Rapid Creek. I understand you served in the war with Bailey.”

“You’re right again. We were with General Custer and the Third Cavalry.”

"I was a major with Law's Alabama Brigade. My family owned a large cotton plantation. Father was a State Senator; so naturally, I got an appointment when the war broke out."

"Naturally," Bolt replied. "Seems I remember running Law's Brigade out of Gettysburg. Of course, I wouldn't recognize you now, all I ever saw were your backs as you ran towards Alabama."

Atop the table, Fitzhugh's fists were tightly clenched as he glared at Bolt, "Nobody ran us off from anywhere, especially at Gettysburg."

Pointing at Fitzhugh's coat, Bolt said, "It seems you're still wearing..."

"Explain something to me," Fitzhugh demanded before Bolt could finish. "What the hell was a Tennessean doing in the Union Army?"

Bolt leaned across the table, "Not that I feel obliged to explain myself to you, but I was defending the United States...and doing my best to put you slave-owning cotton kings out of business."

While Bolt was speaking, Eb got to his feet and offered Lana his hand. Fitzhugh was bright red as he motioned for several of his hired guns and rose to his feet. Performing for the crowd around him, he pointed his finger at Bolt in a grand exaggerated gesture.

"I say, you're a traitor to your country and a disgrace to the great state of Tennessee!"

Fitzhugh said it loud so everyone in the place could hear him. He began to look around the room almost like he was waiting for applause. The former Rebel was under the false impression he was safe as long as his hired gunmen were there to back him up.

Bolt sprang to his feet so fast his chair went flying across the room behind him. He reached across the table with his left hand and grabbed Fitzhugh by the collar. With a look of growing panic on his now beet-red face, Fitzhugh's hands were hanging limp at his side like a rag doll in Bolt's grasp.

Bolt dragged Fitzhugh across the table to within inches of his face. Dishes and glassware scattered across the floor. Fitzhugh was

squirming, trying to get his feet under him as the table rolled up on edge. Bolt still held Fitzhugh as he took a deep breath.

"I never could stand the smell of you pompous sons-o'-bitches who'd make yourselves rich from the sweat of another man's back then sell his wife and kids to the highest bidder."

When Fitzhugh finally managed to get his feet on the floor, he reached for the derringer and pulled it from his sash. Before he could cock it, Bolt slapped it away, drew back and punched him square in the face. The little gun went flying across the room as the former rebel stumbled backwards and fell over the chair behind him. He hit the floor gasping for air with blood pouring out of his nose.

Leaving Lana safely out of harm's way, Eb stepped into the fight just as Claiborne's men joined in. Ducking Billy Sands' punch, Eb slugged him square in the chest, sending Billy to his knees unable to breathe.

Bolt hit the third man driving him to the floor. Fitzhugh was struggling to get up as the hired gunman fell on him.

Eb gave the second gunman his left and turned back to Billy, who had just managed to stand up. The fringe on Eb's leather shirt would snap with each punch. He was punching the youngster when the third man got up and grabbed him from behind.

Eb side-stepped and slammed his fist backwards into the groin of the man holding him. Spinning out of the gunman's grip, Eb finished him with a hard left fist.

Fitzhugh got to his feet just in time to catch another smashing blow from Bolt's right fist. This time he went down for good. Bolt finished the first hired gunmen as Eb dropped Billy with another hard right punch. The third gunman lay groaning in a fetal position on the floor. He wasn't getting back up.

"Thanks for your help," Bolt said as he handed Eb his hat.

"You're welcome. Looks like this war's over and that peacock lost again. Let's get out of here."

Buffalo Grass Rider

Old Elijah had been watching from a distance. He heard what Bolt said and he gave Bolt a smile from across the room. Bolt nodded at the old man and turned to Lana who was standing against the bar.

She was breathing heavy, her face flushed with excitement at the display of raw masculinity she had just witnessed. Lana was more or less a lady, but if Bolt had given her any indication he was interested, she would have taken him to her bed right then.

“Good night, Lana,” Bolt said as he walked by her.

“Wait a minute,” she said, taking his arm. “I want the truth. Were you really from Tennessee and serving in the Union army?”

“There were a lot of us,” Bolt replied, “that’s why we won. Thanks for supper.”

“Anytime, cowboy,” she said, “anytime at all.”

In the background, Fitzhugh was helped to his feet by the bartender. When he was finally upright, the bruised and battered rebel jerked his arm away from the bartender and hurried away toward his room. He was trying to wipe the blood off his coat with a bar towel.

Bolt didn’t know it at the time, but the beautiful Cajon temptress was about to become a very important and complicated part of his life. Her growing affection could well mean the difference between living or dying for him and his partner.

Chapter Two: The Orphan

It was just after sunup when Garland Claiborne roused his men out of their bunks. They lived in an abandoned prospector's camp on top of Goat Mountain. The only access to their stronghold was a steep trail winding up from the road at Potato Creek.

Garland's gang was four guns short of what it had been the day before. Jack Strong was fixing breakfast for the remaining men. Jack was too old to take part in most of the raids, but he was still meaner than most. He stayed around the hideout most of the time and did the cooking.

Garland took a seat and Jack poured him a cup of coffee, "What happened out there yesterday?"

"We got surprised by Bailey's new drivers. The others always stopped and gave us what we wanted. They never wanted to make a fight of it or die for that gold."

"Who are the new drivers?"

"I don't know, but they sure got plenty of sand," Garland said, "the big one on top of the coach was picking my boys off with no problem at all."

"Some of the boys said the driver was an old gray-haired codger."

"He was," Garland said, "That crazy old man nearly drove right off the road when he killed Bert and Teddy. Ran 'em right off into Mongol Canyon; came within inches of killing everybody on that coach."

"Sounds like we got trouble," Jack said.

"Too much damn trouble," Garland said, "Get this bunch fed, me and Slick are going to town to see Fitzhugh."

Sylvester Mason had been Garland's best friend long before they had come to the Dakota Territory from Alabama. Orphaned by the Civil War and forced to survive on his own since childhood, Sylvester earned the well-deserved nickname, Slick.

Garland was a dozen years younger than Fitzhugh and not as passionate about the old south. Fitzhugh had a master plan to raise a fortune in stolen gold and set up a new Confederate States of America somewhere in the Deep South. Garland wasn't privy to all the details, but he knew there was a vast ring of conspirators around the southeast and down in Mexico who were part of Fitzhugh's plan.

Fitzhugh still dreamed of valiant charges under the rebel battle flag, admiring ladies under magnolia trees in the moonlight and Lana on his arm in the presidential palace of the new Confederacy.

Being a little more stable and practical than his brother, Garland was in this deal strictly for the money. He intended to go along with Fitzhugh's plans and make himself a rich man in the process. He doubted the old south would ever rise to its former glory and he really didn't care one way or the other.

After a quick breakfast, Garland and Slick prepared to ride to Rapid Creek. Slick strapped on his pistol belt, knotted a red bandanna around his neck, and put on his derby hat.

"Why don't you get a real hat?" Garland asked, "You look like a whorehouse piano player in that thing."

"Don't trouble yourself about it," Slick replied, "I like my damn hat. I thought you were in a hurry to get to town."

After negotiating the steep trail down to the coach road, it was a ride of about six miles into Rapid Creek. It was mid-morning when Garland and Slick walked into the Gold Dust Saloon.

Being too early to be open for business, most of the chairs were still up on the tables. The hired-man was sifting through a mound of recently swept-up sawdust looking for any trace of spilled gold dust while the bartender washed and stacked glasses behind the bar.

Garland spotted Fitzhugh sitting with Billy and two other men. Fitzhugh had two black eyes and a bandage across the bridge of his broken nose. Suffering from two broken ribs, Billy's chest was wrapped so tight, he could barely breathe. The other two hired guns were also bruised and battered. Billy was relieved to see Garland in town. He was in no shape to navigate the steep trail up to the hideout on horseback.

Rough River Gold

“What happened to you all?” Garland asked, taking a seat.

“Those new drivers of Baileys came in here last night,” Fitzhugh said.

“I thought there were only two new men working for Bailey?”

Billy struggled to speak, “That’s all...there...was.”

Slick had a big grin on his face as he asked, “You mean those two old men did this to the four of you.”

Considering Slick to be born below their social class, Fitzhugh never approved of Slick’s friendship with Garland and he was in no mood for criticism.

“This was nothing compared to what they did to your gang.”

“We heard they killed some of your men on the road from Custer,” Billy said.

“You heard right,” Garland said. “What do you plan to do about them?”

Slick pulled his pistol and sighted down the barrel, “Let’s just go over there and kill both of them.”

“Not so fast,” Fitzhugh warned. “We don’t want to draw any outside attention to this situation until we make the big strike against the shipment from Rough River. I’ve gotten word the government may have people out here sniffing around.”

“Fitzhugh’s right,” Garland said, “If those men are federal agents, killing them in cold blood right here in town could be a big mistake.”

“I’ve got a much better idea,” Fitzhugh said. “We’ll take those two alive if we can. When we take the gold from the Rough River mine, we’ll take them with us to Mexico.”

“That’s a good idea,” Garland said. “They’ve drawn plenty of attention to themselves here. If they disappear right after the shipment is stolen, it’ll look like they took it.”

They paused as Lana approached the table. She smiled at Garland and Slick and turned to Fitzhugh, “I’m going to the post office.”

“Another letter to your family,” Fitzhugh asked.

“Yes, Mother worries if she doesn’t hear from me every week.”

“Hurry back, my dear,” Fitzhugh said, “We open soon.”

Buffalo Grass Rider

Billy waited until she was out the door, "She seemed mighty interested in those two cowboys last night."

"Just how much do you really know about her?" Garland asked.

"Lana is alright," Fitzhugh said, "she was just flirting with those men."

"It just seems funny to me she showed up here right after we started planning this deal."

"Why did she leave New Orleans to come up here?" Billy asked, "It don't make sense."

"I don't know and I don't care," Fitzhugh said, "Hiring her has been good for business. She brings class and excitement to this God forsaken country."

"That's for damn sure," Slick said, "I'd like to stir up a little excitement with her."

Fitzhugh scowled and pointed his finger at Slick's face, "If you want to keep working for me, stay the hell away from Lana."

"I don't need your permission to..."

"Shut up, Slick," Garland said. He turned back to Fitzhugh, "Regardless of what you think, I don't trust her."

"Let me take care of Lana," Fitzhugh said, "you two just do your jobs. This thing is about to happen, there's no time for quarreling among ourselves."

"You're right," Garland said, "It'll take all of us to do this."

"When the time comes, we'll all get out of here and go to Mexico," Fitzhugh said, "After all is ready, we'll take our men across the Gulf to meet the forces assembled near Pensacola. Most of the army is out here chasing Indians; the Yankee's won't be expecting an invasion from the sea. When we take back our homes in Alabama, the people will take up arms to join us and the Confederacy will be alive again."

Shaking his head in mock amusement, Slick started to say something until Garland shoot him a warning glance and raised his hand for silence, "Fitzhugh, if we pull off this robbery, how are we going to get all that gold south to Mexico?"

"Let me worry about that."

Rough River Gold

“It’s a big worry,” Garland said, “If there’s as much bullion as you say, it’ll weigh several tons.”

“Don’t worry, little brother, I’ll take care of it. You just be ready when I send word.”

Just down the street, Lana walked into the post office and smiled at the man behind the counter. John Spencer was the postmaster and telegrapher for Rapid Creek.

“Another letter going back east,” Spencer asked, looking over his spectacles.

“Yes, for Mother.”

Spencer took the letter and noticed the address. “I thought you were from New Orleans.”

“I am, but Mother has lived in Virginia for the last few years.”

“Arlington, Virginia, isn’t that close to Washington?”

“Yes, right across the Potomac. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious,” he replied, “I like to test my geography now and then.”

“You’re very good at it,” she said, “why don’t you come by later; I’ll buy you a beer.”

“I may just do that, and don’t you worry, I’ll get this letter to your mother.”

Early next morning, Fitzhugh Claiborne was at the post office. Postmaster Spencer was nervously watching the street from the window, “This is highly irregular.”

“I’m paying you enough to take a few chances,” Fitzhugh said. “Where’s the letter.”

Spencer had already steamed open the envelope. He handed it to Fitzhugh and waited as he read.

“Hurry up,” Spencer said, “somebody’s likely to come in.”

“Will you relax, I’m trying to read.”

The letter read:

Mother,

Buffalo Grass Rider

*All is going well, I'm getting settled in to my life here in Dakota.
I've met some very interesting people and I'm close to an important
man. I feel he could be the one to lead me to the end of the rainbow.
All my love to you and the family, take care and I will be in touch.*

Your loving daughter

Lana

"Alright, seal it back up and send it on its way," Fitzhugh said, "I don't think we have anything to fear from her." He left the post office with a big smile on his face, figuring his plan to possess Lana was working quite well after all. He must be the important man she had written about.

Early the following Sunday morning, Bolt and Eb were relaxing and having a cup of coffee with Ben in the stage office.

"I want you boys to saddle up and ride up to Rough River in the morning," Ben said. "There's some people there I want you to meet."

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Bolt said.

"Are you going over to the Gold Dust tonight?" Ben asked.

Eb was flexing the fingers on his right hand, "Not likely. I think we pretty much wore out our welcome the other night."

"He's right," Bolt said. "We'll just grab a bite to eat at the café down the street and stay out of sight tonight."

"I hear you made quite an impression on Claiborne and his men. I tried to tell you that was a bad bunch over there."

"They weren't so bad," Eb said with a grin.

"Claiborne will likely have more help, if and when we ever tangle with him again," Bolt said.

"Lana won't be leaving you alone unless I miss my guess," Eb said.

Ben had a big grin on his face. "That's one problem a lot of men around here would like to have."

"Don't you worry none," Eb said, "my pardner can fight his way through that bunch of Cajun petty-coats."

"That's very funny," Bolt said, as Ben and Eb had a good laugh.

Rough River Gold

Ben got to his feet and put on his hat, "Come on, boy's; let's get some breakfast. I'm buying."

The trio made their way down to the café and had a good meal. Since it was Sunday, there were only a few people on the street.

After lingering over their breakfast for a while, they walked back out onto the sidewalk. It was midmorning.

"I got some things to do at home," Ben said. "I'll see you boys in the morning before you leave."

Bolt and Eb were walking down the street when they spotted a man and woman with a little girl approaching. The man was skinny and pale, almost sickly looking, like he never got much sunshine. He was wearing a thread-bare black suit and a flat-brimmed straw hat.

The heavysset woman was stuffed into a flowing low-cut blue dress. Her bulging bosoms looked like two feeder pigs trying to back out of a gunny sack. She was wearing heavy rouge, bright red lipstick, and way too much royal blue eye shadow.

The little girl looked to be about twelve or thirteen. She had a small thin frame with long straight hair and big blue eyes. Dressed in a pale blue gingham dress, she seemed to be a little angel. Bolt was disturbed by the fact someone put rouge on her cheeks.

As the trio approached, Bolt thought it unlikely the little girl could be related to either one of the people with her. They were an odd couple at best, but he knew you can never figure what some people are attracted to. Regardless, it was really none of his business.

Unknown to Bolt, the man was Homer Webster, the skirt-herder that worked for the painted-up woman. Known around town as the Duchess, she was the madam at the Oriental House, a high-class and very lucrative brothel in Rapid Creek.

The little girl made eye contact with Bolt from quite a distance down the sidewalk and never looked away. Bolt gave her a smile, but the child's sad expression never changed. She looked lost and afraid, like she wanted to tell him something.

Buffalo Grass Rider

Bolt's intuition was telling him something was wrong. He was feeling bad about the desperate look in her eyes but there was nothing he could do, assuming she was with her parents.

When they got close, Bolt and Eb stepped aside to let them pass. The little girl continued to stare up at Bolt. When he noticed her eyes filling with tears his gut started to knot up.

"Morning," Eb said as he tipped his hat to the woman.

Bolt turned his back and started to reluctantly walk away. After a few steps, he paused and looked back. Eb started to ask what was wrong when the man in the straw hat noticed Bolt had stopped. He paused and turned back to them.

"Gentlemen, would either of you like a taste of this precious little flower?"

Eb stared, unsure he'd heard the man right. When Eb looked back to see his partner's reaction, Bolt was swelling up like a big black Montana thunderhead.

"That's right," the Duchess added. "She just arrived at the Oriental House, pure virgin merchandise fresh from the orphanage in Kansas City."

That was all Bolt needed to hear. Now he knew exactly what the child meant to the people she was with. His boot heels were rattling the planks underfoot as he stormed passed Eb, straight at the couple.

The warrior spirit in Bolt was raging. His face turned blood-red as two pulsing veins popped out on his forehead converging right over the bridge of his nose.

Still unaware of his impending doom, Homer just kept pouring coal to the locomotive bearing down on him, "You can have this one all to yourself. I haven't tried it myself yet, so you'll be the first."

Eb wasn't exactly sure what his partner was about to do. He'd known Bolt for many years, but he'd seldom seen his partner in the state of rage he appeared to be in just then. Eb, however, was pretty sure the idiot in the straw hat was about to have a real bad day.

The instant he was close enough, Bolt lashed out with his right hand. The smack of his fist colliding with Homer's face was accompanied by a loud hollow crack. The straw hat dropped spinning onto the sidewalk.

Knocked clear into the muddy street, Homer landed on his back and lay still. His mouth was gaped wide open, as if posed in some silent ghoulish scream. His lower jaw was more than an inch out of alignment with his upper teeth.

The Duchess was screaming at Bolt, "Oh my God...you've killed him!" When Bolt turned his wrath on her, she backed up against a store-front. "Stay away from me!" she begged, pulling the child over in front of her as a shield.

Bolt took the little girl by the arm and pulled her out of the woman's grasp. He pushed the child toward his partner. Eb took the little girl by the hand and pulled her up close to him, "It'll be alright, little one," he assured her.

Bolt was standing over the cowering woman.

"Help me! Someone, help me!" she screamed.

Only the tiniest shred of chivalry was keeping her from the same fate as her companion. Bolt was shaking his fist in her face as he stormed at her.

"If I ever hear of you selling another child on the street or in that damn whorehouse, I swear before God Almighty, I'll kill you and burn that den of iniquity to the ground."

The woman continued pleading for someone to help her. There were people gathering around, but nobody in their right mind was about to get in the middle of it. Bolt was ready to explode, his blood-red face inches from hers.

"Mark my words," he swore again, "Burn it to the ground."

In desperation, she ducked under Bolt's arm to make her escape and he let her go. She abandoned poor Homer who was still lying lifeless in the street. After stepping right in the middle of Homer's straw hat, she ran sobbing down the sidewalk with blue eye shadow running down her face.

Buffalo Grass Rider

Bolt was gasping for air as he stood in front of Eb, "I can't...abide slavery. Or those...that would bond it onto children!"

"I can see that," Eb said, "take it easy."

"I won't allow it...I won't!"

"It's gonna be alright, take a breath, it's over," Eb said, "Just take it easy."

In all the years he had known him, Eb never heard Bolt threaten to kill a woman. After Bolt finally managed to calm down a little, they took the child to the stage line office. Bolt was trying to apologize for his outburst, but the child had already seen through all that thunder. She took to Bolt and Eb right away. Seeing Bolt flatten Homer and run the Duchess off was the greatest thing she had ever seen.

Her intuition had been right about this big man. She knew he was the one who could help her as soon as she saw him on the street. She told them her name was Rachel, she was twelve years old and she was from Missouri.

"Do you have any kin-folks around here?" Eb asked.

"I don't have family anywhere," she said, "My mom and little brother died a couple of years ago from a fever. My daddy started drinking and wouldn't work the farm, so some men came and made us leave."

"That's a tough break for a little girl," Eb said.

"Where's your dad now?" Bolt asked.

"He loaded some of our things in the wagon and left the farm. My daddy drove me into town, dropped me at the orphanage and just drove away." Rachel started to cry and Bolt pulled her over close to him.

"Damn," Eb whispered. This child's story touched a spot in his heart he tried to keep covered up.

"It's gonna be alright," Bolt said with his arm around her. "How did you get mixed up with those two you were with this morning?"

"After a year at the home, the man who ran it said I was too old to just live there without working to pay my way. Those people came

by a week ago and gave him some money. He told me I was to go with them and work for my keep."

"We got here yesterday," she said, "The house where they live is a bad place. I was afraid to stay there last night. I couldn't sleep. There are people up all night long and the men there said terrible things to me."

"You don't have to stay there anymore," Bolt said. "You can get plenty of sleep right here if you can stand Eb's snoring." They made her a place on the couch in Ben's office so she could have a little privacy.

That evening, after Rachel was asleep, Bolt and Eb were relaxing in the back room. Eb was curious about what Bolt planned to do with her.

"Just what, exactly, are you going to do with that child?"

"I don't know," Bolt replied.

"When this job gets started, we could be gone for days at a time. If we're not around, that woman may try and take the child back."

"That would be a huge mistake on her part," Bolt said.

"I know, but that child has been through enough. She needs some peace and security. We need to make sure she gets it."

"Who's we? I figured she'd be my problem."

"After hearing that story, goodness...it's enough to break your heart." Eb stopped short before he let his real feelings come to the surface. "You know what I mean, we're partners ain't we?" Eb leaned forward in his chair and looked Bolt in the eye, "I was damn proud to be yours out on that street this morning. Most folks would have just walked away."

Bolt gave him a grin. He knew his crusty old partner had a big heart, even though he did his best to hide it most of the time.

That same evening, the Duchess was in Sheriff Gus Pippin's office demanding the return of her property. Homer was with her. Earlier, the doctor wired his shattered jaw shut and he was in terrible pain. Wearing his crumpled straw hat, Homer was half drunk and slurping a mixture of whiskey and laudanum through a glass tube.

"I want that girl back," the Duchess demanded. "She's mine, bought and paid for."

Homer nodded in agreement and groaned, "Owww!"

"You should go arrest that cowboy," the Duchess said, "he nearly killed poor Homer. He'll be on liquids for the next three months."

Trying not to laugh, Gus asked, "Did...ah...did anybody else see him do it?"

"Of course," she said, "there were other people on the street. None of them were my friends, just a bunch of church-goers."

"Nobody complained to me."

"They're all afraid of that cowboy from Montana."

"Or maybe it's because the decent people in this town really don't give a damn what happens to you or your whorehouse," Gus said.

"That's absurd, besides the law is the law." The Duchess shoved her finger in Gus' face to emphasize her demands, "And it's your job to enforce it!"

Sheriff Pippin heard about the stagecoach holdup, the fight at the Gold Dust, and the episode on the street. He had no intentions of going down to confront the two Montana cowhands about anything short of murder.

Gus Pippin never had much use for the Duchess and he resented being ordered around by her. The only people Bolt and Eb offended were the scum of Rapid Creek and Gus really didn't have a problem with that.

"I don't need the likes of you to tell me my job," Gus said, "You can't buy and sell people. If you think you can take her away from those two, I won't try to stop you. Matter of fact, I'll be happy to come to your funeral as long as they serve a free lunch. Now get out of my office and take this babbling fool with you."

The Duchess left in a huff. "Serve a free lunch," she mumbled, "I'll teach that tinhorn sheriff a lesson about messing with the Duchess."

Rough River Gold

When they were back at the Oriental House she gave Homer his instructions. "Go find Tom Harper and Johnny Graves. Tell 'em I got a little job for them." Homer took a big sip from his bottle and headed out the door.

Except for what she was wearing, all the clothing Rachel owned was still at the Oriental House. She wanted no part of going back there to get any of it. Next morning after breakfast, Bolt and Eb took her to the dry-goods store. They bought her two new dresses and a pair of warm shoes. The storekeeper's wife helped Rachel pick out a few other little girl things she needed. They finished it off with a warm coat, a wool hat and a little red carpet-bag to carry it all in.

"What's all this for?" Rachel asked.

"You're going on a little trip," Eb said.

"Are you going with me?"

"Not right now," Bolt said, "we have a job to finish here."

"I don't want to leave you," she pleaded, her hand in his.

Bolt took her back to the office and sat down with her on the couch. Eb pulled up a chair and joined them.

"Rachel," Bolt said, "We agreed to do a job for some folks and we can't go back on our word."

"Why can't I just go with you?"

"It's going to be a tough job and it may be a little dangerous. We can't have you along and get you hurt."

"What's going to happen to me?"

"You're going to a place where you'll be safe and cared for by some really nice people."

Rachel's hands were folded in her lap as her eyes started to fill up with tears, "You're sending me to another orphan's home."

"Lord no," Eb said. "You're going to the Lonesome Wind, the ranch where we live up in Montana."

"That's right," Bolt said. "And as soon as we get this job done, we'll be right along. You can count on that."

"You mean I can live there with you two?"

Buffalo Grass Rider

“Don’t see why not,” Eb said, “Most of the people that live there now started out as strays or orphans.”

“Then I’ll go,” she said with a big smile. “When do I leave? How will I get there?”

“You’re going on the stage,” Bolt said, “It’ll be a long ride, but I’m gonna ask the people who work for the stage line to look after you.”

That afternoon, the stage was loading for the first leg of its trip to Coulter Creek. The driver was Lars Nielson, a big Norwegian and a mountain of a man. He stood six-foot-three and weighed over three hundred pounds. Lars had long blonde hair and a full bushy beard. With a horned helmet on his head and a broad-axe, he would have made the perfect Viking.

Lars’ partner, Jim-Bob Doubles, wasn’t as heavy as Lars, but he was rawhide tough. Tall and lanky, Jim-Bob was the serious one of this pair. He never had much to say, but Jim-Bob was more than capable of taking care of himself and his passengers.

Jim-Bob carried a ten-gauge double-barreled coach-gun stoked with buckshot on his lap. He had an 1873 Winchester tucked under the seat and a converted Navy Colt strapped on his right side.

Bolt and Eb brought Rachel out and helped her up into the coach. There were two women among the passengers that seemed willing to watch out for the little girl. Rachel hugged Eb and then Bolt.

“Thank you for taking care of me,” she whispered in his ear, “please hurry home,”

Bolt smiled. “Don’t you worry, we’ll see you soon.”

Eb pulled his bandana from around his neck and was wiping his eye as he turned away from the coach.

“What’s the matter with you?” Bolt asked.

“I just wish one of us could go with her. I hate to see the little thing have to...to...never you mind!”

Bolt grinned at his tough-as-leather partner and turned to the big Viking.

Rough River Gold

“Lars, I’d appreciate it if you could watch out for Rachel until you get to the turn-around. Maybe you could ask the other driver to do the same.”

Having heard the story about Rachel and the life she was headed for until Bolt stepped in, Lars had great admiration for this man from Montana.

“I’ll do better dan dat, my friend,” Lars replied. “Me ‘n’ Jim-Bob, vill take this run all the vay to Coulter Creek, just so ve can vatch over little Rachel.”

“She’ll be safe,” Jim-Bob assured him. “Anybody trying to do her harm will have to come over us first.”

“Yah, and dhey’ll play hell getting dat done,” Lars said with a grin.

“Then, I’ll owe you both,” Bolt said. “Just deliver her and these letters to U.S. Marshall Sam Boston in Coulter Creek.”

Jim-Bob took the letters and stuffed them in the inside pocket of his duster, “Consider it done.”

“Rachel has enough money to take care of her meals,” Bolt said, “and here’s twenty dollars for your trouble.”

“We won’t take your money,” Jim-Bob said.

The big Viking pulled off his leather glove and extended his paw of a hand, “But ve’ll take your hand.” Bolt took it in a firm grip. Lars spent his days holding the reins to a six-horse team and he had a grip like a vise. Releasing Lars, Bolt turned to Jim-Bob and shook his hand.

Those were the last words exchanged between the three men. The handshakes sealed it for Bolt. He knew Rachel was safe and on her way. She was in the care of the most unlikely pair of rough-n-tumble guardian angels any little girl ever had.

The big Viking climbed up in the seat and whipped up the team as Jim-Bob settled in beside him. Lars kicked off the brake and pulled the slack out of the reins. Jim-Bob covered his legs with a leather blanket and laid the coach-gun across his lap.

Buffalo Grass Rider

“Gee-yapp!” the big Viking yelled to his team. He raised his arms and rolled the reins across the horse’s backs, “Gee-yapp!” The big Concord stagecoach rocked back-and-forth as the trace-chains snapped tight and it began to roll forward. Rachel was waving from the window as the coach pulled away.

“I think you better marry Scarlett, before you all have too many more kids,” Eb said.

“Yeah, I think you might be right.”

Harper and Graves were watching from the porch of the Oriental House as the coach passed by them. They turned and went inside after it disappeared down the street. The Duchess was watching from the window.

“What am I paying you for?” she asked, “now she’s gone.”

“We couldn’t do anything right here in town,” Harper said.

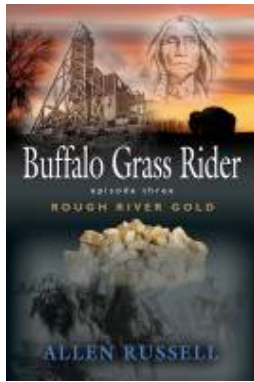
“He’s right,” Graves said, “We’ll catch ‘em out on the road when they don’t expect us. Then we’ll get her back.”

“Well, see that you do. Remember, you don’t get paid until she’s back with me for good. There’s an extra five hundred dollars in this for you if you kill those two Montana cowboys and the sheriff.”

Harper cinched up the stampede string on his hat. “We’ll take care of those cowboys and get the girl back, but we won’t be killing any lawmen.”

“Alright...alright,” the Duchess said, “Stop talking and get after her.”

Harper and Graves were two-bit gun slingers that took care of the Duchess’ dirty work at times. They didn’t know it yet, but this time they’d earn their money or die trying.



***Rough River Gold** is episode three of the award winning Buffalo Grass Rider series. Bolt Ashton, known to the Indians as Buffalo Grass Rider, and his saddle partner are drawn into an international plot to steal a huge stockpile of federal bullion hidden deep in the Black Hills of the Dakota Territory.*

Buffalo Grass Rider

Rough River Gold

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